

Interview with Brenda Eichelberger and Janie Nelson
13 February 1997
Chicago, IL

[Much tape recorder malfunctioning. Nelson and Eichelberger had described their childhoods. Nelson's mother was a waitress in the cafeteria at United Steele in Chicago and her father worked in the plant. Eichelberger's mother stayed at home with the children and her father worked for (?) the post office, but he was highly educated. Eichelberger grew up with a younger brother who was allowed more freedom than she was and she always thought this was unfair. Eichelberger finishes talking about her father here...]

Eichelberger: His degree was in the Romance languages.

Q: I wanted to get into some of the things about the organizations. You were about to talk about why you thought other women joined the other black feminist organizations that you formed and you were saying that both of you both felt like you had been feminists, but just never had a word for it. So that, y'know, what did you say your sister said? That it was a question of---

Eichelberger: ~~Well, instead of someone asking me, "Why am I a feminist?", they should be asking, "Why are you not a feminist?"~~

*asked to
justify self
as feminist*

Nelson: You should be asking them why they are not a feminist.

Eichelberger: That's right. ~~I should be asking them why they are not a feminist, because it's sort of like asking me to justify my existence or justify my philosophy, which is part of me. To be a feminist.~~

So I think women joined for several reasons. ~~I think just to see black women~~ *reason*
~~active and doing things.~~ I think that was part of it for a lot of women. I know *women*
~~there would be some women---they'd join---I remember one woman in particular---~~ *joined*
and I was kind of surprised that she said this because she had a fairly good job
in the corporate world. I don't remember what her job was but I think it was a
managerial position. And I don't remember her name. As I told you there have
been so many women involved I can't remember her name. But she said, "What I
want to do is be as assertive as you are. I want to be able to talk the way you
do." Because as I said it seems like we're always having to defend ourselves.
That's why I wrote so many articles about the myths. And she had seen me on some
talk show. Now the thing is that was pre-times of the tapes or the VCR. So at
the television shows---television studios they did have tapes and some tapes
they kept. But now people have VCRs and they can tapes things, Of course, I
could have taped the shows if I had---VCRs didn't exist at that time. Not for
the person to have in the home, so I can't remember what show it was. But it
was some show and people were asking---kind of throwing questions at me right
and left. And people---she was impressed and other people would tell me that,
too. That they were so impressed at the way I handled it. ~~That I would---~~
~~whatever question they shot at me I would answer it just like that [finger~~
~~snapping] because it was---oftentimes it was something negative about feminism.~~
~~And I always tried to show that feminism is not negative. And I remember she~~
~~said that that's what she wanted. She wanted to be able to talk and be able to~~
~~assert herself in the manner that I was asserting myself.~~

Nelson: To what end?

Eichelberger: Hm?

Nelson: What did she want to accomplish by that?

Eichelberger: I don't recall her saying exactly what but this why I was kind of surprised she said it because as I said, she had a corporate position. I think she had a managerial position. So I was kind of surprised because it's not like she was somebody who was cleaning somebody's kitchen.

Nelson: But we also had a cross-section of women that were attracted to the movement, the black feminist movement. And, uh, we had blue collar women, we had highly educated women. And we had single women, married women. It was a cross-section of things, a cross-section of people who joined the feminist movement. *members composition*

Eichelberger: I think some just liked the idea of fellowship with women. They liked that idea. *new women joined*

Q: Did, um---was there a certain age range that you could see?

Eichelberger: Well, we did have a broad age range, but most of the women were fairly young.

Nelson: At that time, this was, like in the late '70s---

Eichelberger: We're talking twenty years ago. Even before 'cause it got started before the late '70s.

Nelson: Most of the women were late 20s.

Eichelberger: Yeah, a lot were in their older 20s.

Nelson: Mid-20s, I would say. Mid-20s on up.

Eichelberger: I remember there was one. There was a high school student.

Nelson: Really.

Eichelberger: Um hm. I can't remember her name now. She was only 20. *high school or college?*

Q: Do you remember how old some of your oldest, older members might have been. Or do you think it was pretty much mid-20s to 30s?

Nelson: Upward to middle aged.

Eichelberger: I'd say the more active ones were 20s to maybe mid-30s. *age of members*

Nelson: Probably middle 40s.

Eichelberger: Yeah, ~~we had some in the middle 40s~~ We did have some.

Q: Are we talking about the Alliance specifically?

Eichelberger: Oh, the same with NBFO. There were some that were older.

Nelson: I think the most active ones were in their middle 20s on up in to the middle 30s.

Q: How were things run within the organization? I saw your name [Brenda] as executive director. Was that an elected position or how did you come to be in that position?

Eichelberger: ~~Well, the way it was is that I was voted in President and the idea of the executive director was to basically, down the line, to be a paid position. Which would~~

be, not necessarily be the same as the president, but a person who ran the day-to-day operations and that was the whole idea of having an executive director. *exec. dir duties*

Q: And did it ever evolve into a paid position?

Eichelberger: No. It never evolved into a salaried position. It never came to that, although I did get paid for speaking engagements. Not all speaking engagements, but some.

Q: And then would a percentage of that go to the organization or the day-to-day operations?

Eichelberger: Yeah. A lot of it went to the organization.

Nelson: Yeah. Formally and informally it went back to the organization. It wasn't, like on paper that it would go back to the organization necessarily. But Brenda ended up spending a lot of money out of her own pocket to keep the organization going. And then there were those of us that felt real strongly about the organization and we would kind of donate certain—I remember for about six months I helped to pay the rent of— *finance*

Eichelberger: Yeah. That's right. Janie was very helpful. Extremely helpful financially.

Nelson: Yeah. Because some of the women, you know, they want to join an organization, but if they don't see immediate results then they kind of, will come every now and then or whatever. *fieldwork of members*

Q: Were you on a certain committee? Was there a steering committee?

Eichelberger: We had a board. We had a board of directors.

Nelson: Yes. I was on the board and, you know, we can go back to some of the difficulties that we had in the organization that kept it from really maturing into something that we had really dreamed about it being.

Q: Yeah. I want to get to that.

Nelson: There were some difficulties in our organization. The thing that, basically, I was working on my doctorate in psychology. And I mean, this is something that I can study [laughter]. I can look at certain things that are going on that maybe other people wasn't aware of. One thing I noticed was that there was a class difference in the organization. Whereby we had women who were basically blue collar, who had jobs that were dead-end jobs. They weren't going anywhere. They had maybe a high school education or maybe not even high school education. And then we had another segment of women that were very—had bachelor's degrees on up and still pushing. And I noticed that in some instances we—plus we were very verbal—and I noticed in some instances we kind of overshadowed them. Not intentionally, but we could verbalize certain things that they couldn't verbalize and then they kind of felt, kind of like, well, maybe this isn't the organization for me. It's not going to answer some of my needs. *class diff in org.*

And I remember we were having a meeting one time and one of the members said, "Now, Brenda, which direction are you going to take this organization in? Are you going to try to answer and satisfy some of the needs and raise some of the issues that the ordinary black woman is faced with?" Which would be the blue collar woman or the woman who's in a situation where she's being abused by her husband and all kind of stuff. Remember this was in the 70s and a lot of these things weren't really on the national agenda, but these things were happening. "Or is this going to be a middle class organization?" Remember? Was it Claire? Claire Anthony and Marva [?] used to always just—they would always have just Brenda, just almost tear her apart like that. *articulation of needs by educated women*
direction of org.
"ordinary woman" or "middle class"

Q: These two women were on opposite ends of the spectrum or they would always pose this question? They were both professors and they would ask this question?

Nelson: Yeah. And they would always pose this--- and it was like, look at Brenda and say, "Now what you gonna---which way?" ~~And there was two camps~~ There was this group over here that was looking at Brenda like [looking stern]. You know what I'm saying? ~~And there was this other group that was saying if you take it in that direction you're gonna lose us and if you take it in this direction you're going to lose us.~~ There was definitely to me, I saw a class difference.

Q: Do you think they were posing that question because they wanted it to be something for themselves as middle class women or they just wanted to have it on the table as dialogue? Or did they sincerely want you to choose which way the organization should go?

Nelson: ~~I think they wanted it on the table as dialogue and they wanted us to form an agenda that included, basically, the grassroots woman. I think a lot of people wanted to take that in that direction toward the grassroots, rather than us doing a lot of intellectualizing and a lot of talking about what we do. I think there were some issues that---see, most black women are not---I don't think, not middle class. Am I right on this? Most black women are not middle class. A lot of black women are at the poverty level is my point. I think they wanted us to take some of those issues. And we---~~ *grassroots*

Q: I was just going ask if you felt that tension? If you felt like you were being pulled about the direction of the organization based on class?

Eichelberger: Some of what you said is beginning to ring a bell. **Some people say, "Well, you're just a bunch of middle class women."** You'd hear that. But, then, there was always someone---complained about one thing or another. Doesn't matter what it was. You couldn't please everybody. **Remember I had said that one complaint was, "Why don't you have it in the black community? Why don't you have your office in the black community?"** I said, "Well, black people are all over Chicago---Northside, Southside, and Westside." It was in the Loop 'cause that's centrally located. Didn't matter where we put it. Not all black people would live in that neighborhood, even if you limit to the poorest neighborhoods. And then a lot of black women would not have wanted to go because they would have felt unsafe. *location of office as indicator of class-bias?*

Nelson: ~~These are some of the underlying tensions. And it's not that these things don't go on in every organization. You have certain dynamics that go on---in any organization there's going to be a power struggle. There's going to be a struggle between being independent---an independent thinker and going along with the group norm. That's true of any organization, but what I'm saying is that there were certain things that seemed to be unique to our organization that posed somewhat of a problem.~~ *problem unique to black women's org.*

Another thing that posed a problem in our organization was, uh [sigh] some of the women who were married or had boyfriends or would go back and talk to members of the community would criticize us because ~~they thought that we were taking something away from the civil rights movement. That we, as black women, should have been behind our man, the Black Man, rather than get independent and assert ourselves independent of the black man.~~ That was one definite thing. Brenda got criticized somewhat because of that and a lot of this stuff was unfair criticism. It really was. It was very unfair that they would load this down on her. But a lot of the issues that they brought up kind of sidetracked us. We spent a---I found that Brenda many times spent a lot of times trying to defend the position that ~~we had rather than moving on and just doing it.~~ Because the black community gave us somewhat of, "What are you black feminists for? You've already been head of the *criticism from black community*

household---the matriarch." We've always been figured as, viewed as the head of the household. Those are some of the myths.

Eichelberger: ~~'Cause there were some black women who viewed this as a lesbian organization.~~

Nelson: Right. ~~Yeah that was another issue, too. They thought we were all lesbians.~~

Eichelberger: [laughter] We couldn't please. It didn't matter what happened, we couldn't please everybody.

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Q: Now were there any lesbians within the organization?

Nelson: Um hm.

Eichelberger: Yes.

Q: And was there any tension there? As far as which issues were being dealt with?

Nelson: No, not so much that. It wasn't so much issues of lesbianism. I don't think so.

Q: ~~Maybe perhaps the~~ women who might've had a problem with lesbians just didn't join the organization.

Eichelberger: ~~No, we had some lesbians in there.~~

Q: But, I mean---

Eichelberger: ~~I know some felt that the organization was anti-lesbian.~~

Nelson: Yeah. Some of them felt that it was anti-lesbians.

Eichelberger: I'm saying that some people outside the organization felt that way.

Nelson: Oh. I didn't know about that.

Q: This is a very basic question how often did you meet?

Eichelberger: We were always meeting. I don't know if you saw any of those calendar of events. We were meeting all the time. Constantly. There was always something going on all the time.

frequency
of meeting
activities

Q: So aside from your business meetings, you would have, I think they were "Coffee and Conversation" meetings.

Eichelberger: We were having the committee meetings, various types of meetings---the C-R, the consciousness-raising. It was always something going on.

Nelson: Assertiveness training.

Eichelberger: Oh, yeah. 'Cause you were asking about the Alternative School.

Q: Right, right.

Eichelberger: Did you see anything on that when you were looking through the things?

Q: I did. I did. There were some booklets and different course descriptions. I can get some information about the committees from the archive things, but I wondered how would you describe the goals of the organization?

Eichelberger: Okay. That was in the membership brochure. Did you see the gold...

Q: I did.

Eichelberger: I guess one of the major goals was to ~~raise the consciousness level of black women and I think we did succeed in doing that.~~ I think that we did. We helped to raise the consciousness. There was a lot of emphasis on consciousness-raising. That was one of the first things that we wanted women would get involved in. We had the C-R groups. So they'd have them in their own homes. Like to say, if you were joining the organization or the people joining at the same time you were joining, you'd get a C-R group going. And the people in that group would determine where you were going to meet. Like, we'd meet at your house one time, somebody else's house sometime, and so on. Some people would use a cell---the term cell is sort of like your own individual cell. And some more people come in and they get a C-R group going. And that was very good to help raise consciousness. goal:
CR of
black
women
(success)

And then we had various committees. ~~We had committees on the issues of rape to educate the membership about that. And there was a lot of activity that we did with other organizations because you find you can do a lot when you work in coalitions with other groups.~~ coalition
work-
rape

Nelson: Like ~~Take Back the Night.~~

Q: Do you, um, with the rape hotline---'cause I remember seeing that someone was going to different training meetings and things.

Eichelberger: Um hm. Yeah.

Q: Did you ever get anything started?

Eichelberger: Yes, we did. The first person to do that was ~~Michelle Gautreaux.~~ And I don't think she would mind my saying this: she was raped, well, actually she was a victim of incest. The person being her father. And I didn't know it at the time, but a lot of times people do something because of their own personal experience. I think that's what moved her to get involved in that.

Q: So did you have a hotline specifically for black women or did people go to another broader women's---

Eichelberger: ~~It was another broader place that we had so that if women wanted to work on the issue of rape then--it was the Northside Rape Crisis Line.~~

Q: And was that in coalition with other women's groups?

Eichelberger: Yeah. ~~It was run by white feminists, but black women were not deterred from being involved.~~ how?

Q: Okay. Let's see.

Eichelberger: Michelle was one of the founders of NBFO. I think you said you saw her name on something? Michelle Gautreaux? She's the one whose mother, well, the Gautreaux decision---

Q: Right. You mentioned that. About public housing?

Eichelberger: Right.

Q: Okay, this a good question: did you feel like the organization espoused a certain political position? You know, did you feel like it was more liberal feminist-oriented or was there some talk about socialism going on and Marxism?

Eichelberger: Well, ~~some of our members are socialist Marxists~~. In fact, I brought a brochure of ~~Wilma Reed's~~ [Black Women's Struggle for Equality, w/ contributions by Linda Jenness, Cindy Jaquette (?), and Pat Wright, Pathfinder, ISBN 0-87348-379-0]. I only have one. And I had forgotten that she was a member. There were so many people that had been members at one time or another. ~~She was very active in the Socialist Workers party and she ran for president of the United States~~. A lot of people have run for president of the United States, no one hears about them because they're not taken seriously. But she did run. That was back in the early 70s. member who was Marxist

Q: Do you feel like the group had any adversaries? Like, people who---'cause, you know, during the 70s there's a lot of infiltration of organizations. Not just the FBI, but also different sorts of socialist organizations or---just different organizations who would try to derail what you were doing?

Eichelberger: Well, I don't know if it was an organized effort, but I know that there'd be people who'd be feeling you should do this way or go that way. People of a socialist bent that felt you should go a certain way. We even had one time, and I don't remember the person's name---in retrospect, I should have said nothing, but I'm the one that brought it up. ~~I brought up the fact that there was a man at our meetings. That this was a man in drag. This was a--I won't say "drag". This was a man who was dressed like a woman.~~ And actually what made him come is Grace Hall [?]. She was a professor at U of I [Illinois] at the time. She's since died. She was a black woman. She had me speak to her class and this guy was there at the time. ~~Dressed like a woman all the time.~~

Q: In class?

Eichelberger: ~~Yeah, in the class and then he joined our organization. Now, I shouldn't have---well, of course. Coulda, shoulda, woulda---I can't change the past. But anyway, I know at one time I mentioned---because he was coming to the meetings---and I mentioned I said, "You know we have someone here who was a man." And, um, I think some women knew who it was and others were saying, "Who? Who? Who? Who?" And so a number of women got very upset and they wanted to confront him and they did confront the guy.~~ transmitted in org.

Q: Why did you feel the need to bring it up? Just so people would know?

Eichelberger: Well, I didn't know they were gonna have the reaction that they had. I really didn't. I guess the reason I brought it up was because it was supposed to be for black women. The way the Alliance was set up is that anyone could be affiliated. White men could be affiliated. We had white men affiliated. We had white men coming in and doing volunteer work. But to be an officer or anything like that you had to be a black female because that was our concentration, our focus. And, so, this person was black but he wasn't female. And so somehow I felt, well, you know this is someone who is a man here. affiliated status

Q: Do you remember this happening [to Nelson]?

Eichelberger: I don't think you were here.

Nelson: Yeah. I was.

Eichelberger: You were.

Nelson: Yeah, but I remember this---I thought I was sitting next to this person.

Eichelberger: Oh, you remember because Monica Faith Stewart was talking to him, so yeah. You were at the meeting then.

Nelson: I think it was because I was sitting next to this person, but I thought he had had a sex trans---

Eichelberger: Transsexual.

Nelson: No, he had had a sex operation so technically he considered himself a female. Now we might be talking about two different people.

Eichelberger: Yeah. Transsexual.

Nelson: Yeah. That's what happened.

Eichelberger: But you would look at him and tell.

Nelson: ~~This was actually a man who had had a sex operation and was now a female. And we were real concerned about that. I remember Brenda calling up the members saying, "What should we do? What should we do?" Because if we put him out he could sue us.~~ *transsexual*
Was that the same one or is this another one? *Why? b/c of non-profit status?*

Eichelberger: Yeah. It's the same one.

Nelson: It's the same one and Brenda was like---and luckily, things petered out: ~~He just disappeared. He didn't come back.~~

Q: After being confronted he didn't come back?

Nelson: I don't remember. ~~The person didn't come back anymore. I think he felt rather uncomfortable. I felt that he was testing us to see what our reaction was going to be. If I remember correctly he had had a sexual operation.~~

Eichelberger: A lot of times they call themselves "transsexuals" when they haven't had the operation yet.

Nelson: Oh, I see. We didn't have any way of knowing whether he had had it or not.

Eichelberger: 'Cause a lot of time the physician suggests that they dress like a woman, get their hormones, and all of that and then if they decide that's what they want to do then they have the operation. He had not had it yet.

Nelson: I had no way of knowing whether he had had it or not, but I know the person that you're talking about. **But we found out that he was a male and, I mean, that really gave us a loop.**

Q: But, I mean, I think this is one of those instances where, like, you were talking about: there's no language to talk about, you know, someone who either dresses as a woman or has a sex change. This goes back to what you were saying about language.

Nelson: Yeah. ~~What is a "woman"? What indeed is a "woman"? How would you define what a woman is?~~

Q: And was there any dialogue about that in the group or was it just, "Whew! He's gone".

Eichelberger: ~~There wasn't too much talk about it.~~

Nelson: No, this was one incident and it just---just think of all the other things we had on the table.

Eichelberger: But there were a lot of incidents. This was one.

Nelson: Yeah, I was going to bring that up if you hadn't. ~~And this was one of the things that pops up and then all of a sudden it disappears, but it still takes up some time.~~

Q: I wanted to go to a letter that I had found between you and Sandra Flowers in Atlanta, who was part of the Atlanta NBFO chapter. And you were, it seemed like, in the correspondence I saw---and you're the "Correspondence Queen"--- there was so much there. It was incredible.

Eichelberger: In these letters did you see the letters from the people to the NABF?

Q: Just letters---well, there were letters to the NABF, but there are also letters that you wrote to other people, sometimes in response to things. There were letters with you trying to initiate communication between the different chapters of NBFO. I guess I was trying to figure out at one point, I think Sandra Flowers said that it felt sort of mutinous---the conversation you were having, like you were doing something behind the national chapter's back. But I just wanted to know, what was your perspective on how the chapter---

Eichelberger: I'm trying to remember. Sandra Flowers---

Q: Yeah, Sandra Flowers. I was trying to see if you remembered anything about the local chapter's relationship to the national chapter.

Eichelberger: I was trying to do something mutinous?

Q: No. You were trying to initiate contact between all the different chapters, but not getting much cooperation from the national chapter.

Eichelberger: Oh! I remember that.

Q: And also you wanted to meet with---you were trying to plan a trip to New York to go and meet with people there to find out what the operations were like. And it seemed like you and Sandra Flowers and also someone in D.C., Jo Benoit, were trying to have some uniformity across all the chapters, but it didn't seem like you were getting that cooperation and I just wondered if you recall any of that going on?

Eichelberger: Yeah, I remember that now. It's interesting when you say this because it's been so long and I say, "Yeah. That's right." ~~Okay, because I found out that the New York chapter, they weren't really well organized. They were just kind of loose.~~ And in fact, we had a conference finally and I got to meet some of the people---

Q: Which conference was this?

Eichelberger: This was in New York. Was it in New York? ~~I think it was in New York that we had a conference.~~ If it wasn't in New York---

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relationship
of Chicago
NBFO to
Nat'l
Office

Nelson: We had one at the Midland Hotel here.

Eichelberger: Yeah, but I'm speaking prior to that time.

Nelson: Okay.

Eichelberger: I remember someone brought up the title, "Well, what is the philosophy of black feminism?," or "what is the definition of black feminism?" And no one said anything so I came up with what I considered the definition and, I remember the people seemed to be very impressed, but I had a definition and here I was. I had gotten the Chicago chapter started with the help of some other women, but I thought that the New York chapter had things more formulated and so on and I thought that these chapters were very active and so on, but I found out that they weren't really. And so, in retrospect, I guess it wasn't that anyone was deliberately not trying to give me any information--

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Nelson: They didn't have it.

Eichelberger: ---it's just that the chapters weren't that strong.

Q: So you feel like there was some sort of good faith effort being made by the New York chapter, but do you think they were just overwhelmed by trying to do all this organizing?

Eichelberger: That could have been it. There were certainly women meeting, but how often they met I don't know because I wasn't constantly going to New York to find out.

Q: I was trying to figure out what was the shift from the National Black Feminist Organization to the National Alliance. I have a bunch of dates written down but I haven't tried to put them on a timeline yet, but do you recall anything where you said, "The Chicago chapter of the NBFO is over so let's start this new organization"?

Eichelberger: Well, I do remember that there was some disagreement with some of the women in the Chicago chapter. I'm trying to remember exactly what it was. Some women had said, "We should just start another organization." And they were the women who actually got NBFO started. So it was the same women that got the National Alliance of Black Feminists---A. Laverne Bennett and Michelle Gautreaux. They were sort of like the core of---because we weren't getting a lot of assistance from the National headquarters.

Shift from
NBFO to
NABF

Q: And were you here at this time? For the forming of the NABF?

Nelson: No, I was doing a doctorate at that point. I don't know too much about the background information.

Q: There was a philosophy of NABF that was written. Do you remember who wrote these philosophies and things? There were also some resolutions that I saw. Do you remember forming these definitions of black feminism and things? Was this a group effort or was thing something that you did on your own or do you remember did these come out of the consciousness-raising groups that you had?

formulat
of docs.

Eichelberger: I guess it was a little bit of all of that because when I was going through some of this material here I saw stuff that I hadn't seen and I think I vaguely remember, "Oh yeah. I do think I remember having some input on this." Now there were some resolutions when we had our conference, but you're not talking about the conference. The conference was in '77.

Q: They might be resolutions from the conference. They didn't have a date on them. It was about eight pages of different resolutions.

Eichelberger: They might have been from the conference [they were].

Q: How do you think this black feminist organization was viewed by the mainstream white feminist community.

Eichelberger: ~~I don't think they saw it in a bad way or a negative way. I never picked that up from any of the white women. In fact, they were often wanting us to join with them in various things that they did. So for the most part they were supportive.~~ *response of white feminists*

Q: Do you feel the same way? That this was coalition work?

Eichelberger: There was a lot of coalition work.

Nelson: They were always interested in what we were doing and willing to support us in whatever.

Eichelberger: ~~I was looking through something, "Women's News for a Change," which carried a series of my articles and I remember that I was a little disgusted with them. This was run by white women and I had gotten this series on Anglogynophobia---I don't know if you saw that. And then they were saying that, "This is too negative," but that wasn't my intention to make it negative. The way I saw it---in other words, if a person has a perception of something being a certain way, whether it is that way or not, then I feel that you need to work with that person. So if a lot of black women had the perception that white women are racist and white feminists don't want black women to be connected with them and so and they're trying to take their men, black men, or whatever---then, I feel that needs to be addressed. So what I was doing was talking about all the reasons and ending with ways that we can try to offset this Anglogynophobia. And so the series was ended a little faster than I had anticipated it doing and I thought, "Well, this is a white women's paper." You know, a white feminist newspaper, so they're the ones that are running the show. So I remember being a little bit ticked by that.~~ *exp. w/ white feminist press & editorial diffusion*

Q: Do you---I have this little statement or question. I was looking through the Combahee River Collective papers and I think that you could be of help with this because there was a comment about you, so I was wondering if either of you know what this was about. I think this goes back to talking about the tensions that may have been in the organization. They were going to do a retreat, the Combahee River Collective, and so they sent out questionnaires about what issues women would like to talk about. And so one woman wrote, she was from Chicago and she wrote: "The small NBFO chapter we has exhausted itself in trying to counter Brenda Eichelberger. We never got much past C-R and eventually we stopped meeting for that. How have other women dealt with women who claim to be feminist, yet behave in very anti-woman, anti-lesbians ways." I don't know who they're talking about here, but "We have one such woman here who is assumed by many women in the movement, and by many of the media who are interested, to be THE voice of black feminism." Which, I guess, by looking through the whole---go 'head.

Nelson: They were probably talking about Brenda.

Eichelberger: Because at first they were talking about me.

Nelson: Yeah, they were probably talking about Brenda. ~~There was a lot of criticism against Brenda. They didn't think she was black enough.~~ See, a black woman---a black feminist is both black and a woman. She's really a double minority. Okay. So she's---some

people say, "Well, Brenda, she's alright as a feminist, but she's not black enough." And then they would go by her name and say, "Well, she's an Eichelberger. Where did she get the name 'Eichelberger' from?" And then they would go into a lot of other things like who you were married to and all that kind of stuff [she was married to a white man during the dates of the org.?). So, the leader became the focus of a lot of hostility and negativism, rather than concentrating on the issue that the leader was trying to---some of the things that the leader was trying to concentrate. And you'll find that that's true of most---a lot of black organizations do that. They go after the leader even though the leader is giving them a message that will help and benefit them. They focus so much on the leader until they forget that maybe she is trying to do something good for them and the community in general. So they get sidetracked and this is what I was telling you about, some of the things that sidetracked the organization.

black authenticity
hostility toward leadership

Q: Do you think it was jealousy or do you think that people just so much wanted their specific issues to be addressed and it wasn't happening?

Nelson: I think it was both of them. I think it was jealousy and they didn't think that their issue was being addressed. And they did not see themselves as being a part of the problem of why it wasn't being addressed.

jealousy
perceived neglect of issues

Eichelberger: Was something in there---a statement about lesbianism in there?

Q: Yeah.

Eichelberger: Read that part again or the sentence.

Q: "How have other women dealt with women who claim to be feminist, yet behave in very anti-woman, anti-lesbians ways."

Eichelberger: Hm. I'm trying to remember.

Nelson: There were definitely a group of women that felt that way.

Eichelberger: Because there were some women who were active in the first organization who knew Margaret Sloan and Margaret Sloan was a lesbian. And I can think of one woman---I kind of doubt if she's the one---I don't know who wrote that. But this particular woman I can think of---Vernita Gray was her name---she was a lesbian and she for whatever reason didn't like Margaret Sloan. I never could figure out why. What it was she didn't like about her. But I don't know. Maybe it was as if they felt that it should have more of a lesbian agenda. But, you know, lesbian wasn't in the title. Feminist was in the title, which didn't mean that you're anti-lesbian. But you know, the thing is, the organization was trying to embrace all black women or any black woman that wanted to be a part of it.

completely regular

Nelson: Right. And they kept trying to push---

Eichelberger: But it wasn't an organization to have solely a lesbian focus, so there's nothing wrong with being a lesbian.

Nelson: But they couldn't see it that way. Each one of the organizations wanted to take the organization into the direction that they wanted to take it into. There were little factions like that.

fracture

Q: What kind? Besides a lesbian faction? What other---a class?

Nelson: Like I told you, it was the class issue that came up also.

Q: Okay.

Nelson: The class issue came up whether we should focus more on certain things that black women, in general, were having problems with. Like being on aid for health facilities, for this, for that, whatever. And then there were those of us who, basically, were working and what we were interested in was making more money in the field that we were in. How do we get up the corporate ladder? How do you progress in the field that you're in? How do you get into graduate school for the PhD whatever? So there was that tension going on. *class issues day-to-day vs. career advancement*

Q: So would you say that there was a middle class faction, but the middle class faction also happened to have started the organization?

Nelson: I would think the middle class started it. Don't you, too, Brenda?

Eichelberger: Yeah. It started the movement. It involved the middle class.

Nelson: And I think that's probably true of most black organizations.

Eichelberger: I remember that was a criticism leveled against the organization and I said, "Well, if you look at the history of organizations, most of them are formed by middle class people." Look at Dr. Martin Luther King's middle class. The civil rights movement. *movmt started by middle class*

Nelson: The civil rights movement was started by middle class people.

Eichelberger: A lot of the people were young, but they were students. And, so---but anyway. This Collective---where is this Collective based?

Q: The Combahee River Collective? Boston.

Eichelberger: Boston. Okay. I knew it wasn't in Chicago. But you said that the comment was made from someone from Chicago?

Q: Right. Right.

Nelson: You almost expect that. I heard a lot of that in the organization 'cause I was, like, not exactly on the fringes of it or whatever, but a lot of people were in the organization before I got into it and I was kind of, like, the quiet one. They knew I was doing research on the organization so they would come and dump it all in my lap [laughing]. I'd say, "You really didn't have to tell me." But they would dump it all in my lap. "You ain't heard the last---I'm gonna tell you this, chile", and I know you're doing research on assertiveness training, but you ought to know what this is about." So I got to hear a lot of stuff that it just---it went one ear and out the other, so to speak. I just never shared it with anybody. But I heard a lot.

Eichelberger: You know, in just listening to that I feel that I don't know if that person was speaking for herself or is speaking for quite a few black women, but if that's how they felt there was nothing to stop them from getting something going. Whether they're going to call it the National Black Lesbian Organization or whatever name they're going to give it. There was nothing to stop them from getting something---in other other words, if they were dissatisfied and didn't like the way things are going, if there are enough of them, then they certainly could have formed a group. What I found is that people are very quick to criticize, but when it came time to take initiative in whatever, then people didn't want to do that. *criticism from within or how would start an org.*

Q: I just wanted to bring that up. It was a curious cross-reference that I have found.

Nelson: They felt that way. Definitely.

Q: I think that's it unless there are other issues you want to talk about or recollections you had about the organization or the work that you did. Do you still consider yourselves black feminists now?

Eichelberger: Oh, yeah. I still consider myself a feminist.

Nelson: Why don't you ask us why the organization is no longer in existence?

Q: That's a good question, too [laughter].

Nelson: I mean, then you come full circle. Why don't you ask us that? We can come up with some theories about why it's not still in existence. And why NOW is still in existence, isn't it? And why we're still---

Q: Why? Why would you say?

Nelson: Let's see. First of all we didn't have the financial backing that NOW had. And I think in order for an organization to stay active, you have to re-invent yourself and we did not re-invent ourselves. By that I mean, you have to catch on---you might---this time period you might be of importance, but in order to remain important I have to do certain things. And, like, NOW I notice re-invents itself. Everytime an issue comes up NOW latches onto it. Like right now, NOW is very active in spousal abuse, basically, with OJ Simpson's case. They've latched onto it either formally or informally. In other words, white women are really picketing and forming groups and raising consciousness of spousal abuse. When actually probably black women are more abused than anybody else but we're not doing it. So that's what I think one of the reasons why we are no longer in existence. We did not re-invent ourselves. We did not stay on top of certain issues that would really keep us going.

reasons for decline

That's one reason. We did not have the finances. That's two reasons: we did not have the finances that the white women had and then probably internal conflict. And just wore out [laughter]. We just got ~~wore out~~. We got tired. We got tired.

financial organization exhausted

Eichelberger: I think there's something else that you had said that I thought was very good. Can you remember how you framed it?

Nelson: Brenda and I discussed this and I was trying to remember how I framed it. What did I say?

Eichelberger: Well, what I'm about to say may help you remember. We didn't talk about this but these are examples. I mentioned how Chicago was hotbed of feminist activity. There were so many women's organizations going---I'm speaking of white women. Now to my knowledge none of those are going on now. Now some of those women's bars may still be in existence. And they may not. There may be some new ones. The others, as far as I know, are not in existence now. So it's sort of like you were saying, sort of like the black civil rights movement. Some organizations are still around. NAACP, Urban League. But a lot of the other organizations that were very active in the sixties, like SNCC---Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee---I don't think that's in existence now.

Q: No.

Eichelberger: So some of those have been reached to a certain extent.

Nelson: Oh. I know how I put it. But anyway, aside from that, the NAACP, too, is in existence, but it's having a lot of trouble and it's trying to capture the youth. More of a youthful movement. ~~People get older, which is what we did basically.~~

Oh, I know what I said the reasons why the organization---one of the reasons. ~~A third reason why it's no longer in existence is that many of the people who came into the organization found what they wanted in the organization. They stayed long enough to find what they wanted in the organization and then they left. They simply left. It was a nurturing ground for some women to start their own businesses, for some women to further their education. For some women to go back to school. Maybe a blue collar woman to go back to school and finish her high school diploma or whatever. And then once they achieved that they no longer felt the need to belong to the organization. In other words, it's like a bird learns to fly, flap the wings and then just runs on off from the nest.~~ So that's what I was talking to Brenda on the phone about. They really accomplished what they wanted and then they just flapped their wings and flew off. *decline*

Q: So they got what they needed and then they didn't put back into the organization?

Nelson: Right. ~~They didn't put back in.~~ They didn't put back in. And this happened to a certain extent to the civil rights movement. A lot of them didn't put back in. Case and point is probably ~~Clarence Thomas~~. Maybe not that dramatic, but a lot of people say, "I made it now so what? I'm gonna look forward. I'm not looking back. I'm looking forward."

Q: Do you feel like the same reasons went into the decline of the organization?

Eichelberger: Yeah, I'd say basically that would be it. ~~As I say, in any organization you're going to have some that are going to be very active and others that are going to have minimal activism.~~ Who maybe do stay a member, but--or if you're talking about a church or whatever it might be.

So what do [inaudible] have to do with it because a lot of women now---some women at the time were already college professors, were already physicians, were already doing well in their fields of endeavor. Others were in medical school or in law school for example. Sharon Wells was in law school. Regina, I forgot her last name, she was in medical school. A lot of them realized their dream and, of course, they were very active pursuing their goals so the time they could spend in organization building was very limited, but there was a certain personal growth for them. So I think they had a certain personal growth out of it and that was helpful.

Q: And how did you feel about that? That people would get what they needed and leave. Because it doesn't seem like either of you did that.

Eichelberger: ~~Well, the way I see it, if they get something out of it good.~~

Nelson: ~~But that doesn't say much for the future of the organization because we're no longer in existence. We can look at it from that point of view and say that they were selfish of them to do it that way. They should have put something back into it.~~

Eichelberger: ~~Well, we were in existence longer than the others. Longer than the ones in New York.~~

Nelson: We did hang on.

Q: What would you say the dates were? From establishment to when you decided to stop?

Eichelberger: '79, '80.

Nelson: It was about the mid-'80s.

Q: It was established in '90---no, 1974.

Eichelberger: Yeah, the Chicago chapter of NBFO.

Nelson: About eight years. 'Cause I know I got my dissertation done, I got my PhD in '81.

[side 2]

Nelson: Lack of funds is always---that's always usually a major reason for the decline of an organization. At one point Brenda and I were the only two that was paying anything.

Q: So were people not paying their dues on time?

Nelson: Yes.

Eichelberger: I believe it was the dues. When we first started a charter chapter of NBFO it was five dollars. And maybe after some people said, "NBFO. What's that five dollar dues?" People were saying, "Well, keep it low so that all woman can afford to join." And then it was decided in NABF to make it a flat rate of \$15. NBFO had a sliding scale. I don't know if you saw that. I don't remember where it started. Two dollars and then went maybe what 60, 30, or 40. But then we had the officers paying money every month. I think it was five dollars or something every month, which is enough to pay the rent on the place because the rent on the place was very reasonable at the time considering it was centrally located. A Loop location. And one of the things that---they decided to build that mall on State Street and then the rent got to be ridiculously high.

Nelson: I think one of the reasons---the main reason why, I kind of predicted, not predicted, but I kind of sensed that one point down the line somebody like you would be sitting across from me asking me. "Now what did you do?" [Brenda laughing] Which is good because the younger generation is showing some kind of interest even, if it might be just one or two people. But if we hadn't done these things, we wouldn't be able to share this with you. And I had always had a sense of history. I think you probably had that sense of history, too. success
↓
legacy

Eichelberger: Sure.

Nelson: Because if you don't do something in your generation then what's the point of being around? So much negativity is out there and I always had a sense of history. And when Brenda said, "Well, we're going to put all this stuff in an archives." I couldn't believe it. They want all this stuff? They want your little stuff? I just couldn't believe this. I just still didn't believe it. I thought Brenda packed up maybe three or four articles and put 'em somewhere. I never dreamed that this is what was happening. legacy

Eichelberger: The organization was unique. It really was.

Nelson: My professor told me when I was working on my dissertation she said, "What? Black feminists..."

Eichelberger: It said feminist in its title. The word "black" and "feminist" in the title was unique.

Q: There were three more sort of clarifying questions I wanted to ask. One was if you have the surveys from your dissertation that you worked with [Nelson's diss., Kent State]?

Nelson: No. I don't. I don't even have a hard copy of my dissertation.

Q: Really? I just wanted to see the actual data, but you collated it well. The other question I had was, um, you were talking about criticisms of the organization and of you. You said that it was probably your last name and who you were married to. Who were you married to?

Eichelberger: Oh, did you see that in the writings or anything? Probably not in my writings.

Q: No, but there was one person who wrote you and they said, like, "P.S. where did you get a name like 'Eichelberger'."

Eichelberger: Well, I was married to a white man, but something I found was interesting, a lot of women---well, not a lot---but a significant number had been married to white men, including Margaret Sloan. She had been married to a white man.

black
women
feminists
& internat.
rel.

Nelson: Yeah, but they had not formed an organization.

Eichelberger: Yeah. This was prior to her forming NBFO in New York. And there were several women in the organization---in fact, I remember one time I was on a talk show--WVON. Wesley South. In fact, I see him every now and then in the Hyde Park Coop. I don't know what made him do this, but he asked me if I was married to a white man. Now maybe he heard it someplace, but I don't think anyone knew it at the time. And there was another woman that was with me and he asked her the same thing! And it just so happened she was married to a white man.

Q: So what do you think was his motivation?

Nelson: ~~That you're not black enough.~~

authentic

Eichelberger: I don't know but then, I guess, that just made the call-in audience even more negative. You know, a lot of these black men had felt threatened anyway.

Nelson: Yeah.

Q: But so you think the implication was that you're not black enough so therefore what you have to say isn't important.

Eichelberger: Yeah.

Nelson: Right. That's what I got out of---I got that out of a lot of people in the organization that would criticize Brenda for that reason. And there were some of us that really did everything we could to protect Brenda from a lot of things that were going on in the organization. We did everything we could 'cause we could see things that were going down. We always used to suggest to Brenda that she should surround herself with people who were personally loyal to her. And Brenda was good hearted, good natured and all that kind of stuff and the snakes---basically, the snakes got at her. That's what happened to you. She was just too---her house was open to everybody. She tried to be a lot of everything to everybody--- a lot of things to everybody. And we who were sitting back knew that this wasn't going to work.

leadership
put full-
accessibility

Eichelberger: Oh, I'll give you an example. I wasn't trying to be everything to everybody, but I guess that somebody felt I was. There was a woman who was a member of the organization and then, I guess she became homeless. Something. I really don't know what happened, but there was another woman who was a nurse---so that's considered a middle class occupation. An RN, not a practical nurse. And she called me up and she expected me to take this woman in! Well, I couldn't understand why she didn't take her in, if she knew! And it wasn't like the nurse was married and had a house full of kids and didn't have any room. She was single. She lived alone. I don't know. Some people had a lot of expectations. They felt that I should take in every stray person or something. I don't mind having people in my house for meeting. They were always at my house. But to expect for me to have somebody at my place to sleep there because they don't have a place. Now that's just getting to be a little much. All types of unreasonable expectations that people had.

Nelson: And Brenda was the organization was, like, it was her life. She just put everything into the organization and we always felt that she was not appreciated as much as she should. She spent her own money. She did all kinds of things for the organization and she wasn't getting the kind of cooperation that she should have been getting. Financially or---I remember Brenda used to---the newsletter would have to go out or something like that and you would be sitting there doing it yourself. When actually she was supposed to have input or somebody come in. In other words, if the committee didn't do what they were supposed to do, Brenda Eichelberger ended up spending her weekends or her evenings doing it.

Eichel's
dedicati-
to group
(financial
time,
emotions

Q: So do you think it was partially because people knew that you felt responsible and you would do what had to be done.

Eichelberger: Um---

Nelson: Uh huh. I think so.

Q: Maybe took advantage of that.

Eichelberger: I don't know if they saw it as taking advantage. I don't know.

Nelson: I felt that they knew that Brenda was going to get it done. She was going to do whatever she could to keep it afloat.

Q: I guess that's a question that I have that I'm trying to figure out about leadership. How do certain people end up being the leaders and what's the impact of that on the organization and on you personally. I mean, did you---I'm sure you kept busy, but once this was---once you decided to disband NABF did you just feel like you had a lot of time on your hands because you weren't answering all the correspondence. It looked like you answered a lot of the correspondence personally.

Eichelberger: At one time it did. It just go to the point where I couldn't answer the correspondence. There was something that came in from the White House, a personal invitation to go to the White House. And I because correspondence was so piled up that I didn't really have a chance to respond to it until after the fact. I couldn't send anyone in place. I should have kept that for the archives. They have it in one of those archives. So it was---Jimmy Carter was in the White House at the time.

Q: And there were also letters from a lot of male prisoners.

Eichelberger: Oh. Yeah.

Q: Some of them were supportive. There was one I read and he had done a lot of reading of feminist classic tracts or whatever and he had sort of very, cordial one page, I-support-my-sisters sort of thing. But there was also one crazy one that I couldn't read because it was written in pencil. He went on a rant because, I think, you wanted him to pay the dues if he wanted to be affiliated. I was just surprised that you kept it.

Eichelberger: I remember one guy wrote, "I are a writer" [laughter]. I showed it to Gail and she laughed.

Nelson: Gail was another one of our leaders. **Gail Katherine Porter. She's in Washington, D.C. Clinical PhD. Johns Hopkins.**

Q: Thanks for adding that last question.

Eichelberger: Some people felt that if it had a strong focus, but see the whole idea was for it to be an umbrella organization. An umbrella, feminist type organization. So, for example, there could have been a strong lesbian contingent if there were enough women who wanted that. A group to focus on the plight of the poor woman. I'm just saying that that was basically actually the goal. For it to be an umbrella type of organization. For it to be an alliance of black feminist organizations. And this was sort of like the central one that would help various groups get started so that if there was something that a woman wanted to get going. You know, she had an interest in, she wanted to get started. So a lot of times women had ideas and I would say, "Why don't you just act on that? Why don't you do that?" But then a lot of times they'd say, "Well, Brenda, everytime I come up with an idea you say, 'Well, why don't you act on it? Why don't you initiate it?'" Well, that's what I tried to encourage, but I found out a lot of the women who wanted to talk about what they would like to see happen that they didn't want to act on that. They didn't want to do that. *role as umbrella org.*
paradox of persons who skills & reluctance to develop those skills.

Q: And so is that how the Minority Women's Affairs got started?

Eichelberger: Okay, well, how that got started that was going to be an arm of NABF, which---to set up the 501(c)3 status because NABF was 501(c)4. We thought it was better for NABF to be 501---I don't know if you're familiar with these numbers? But they mean taxwise, 501(c)3 means tax exempt and 501(c)4---501(c)3 and 501(c)4 are both non-profit. 501(c)3 means tax exempt so that if you---

Q: Get donations and you don't have to pay taxes.

Eichelberger:

Yeah, but we wanted NABF to be as political as possible. We wanted to be able to espouse our ideas without someone saying, "Well, hey, you're getting funding. You can't say this. You can't say that." So therefore, the 501(c)4 for NABF.
non-profit, but taxed?

Successes

CR

Alt school

personal growth

↳ support through
law, medical school,
grad

legacy exists now (history)

decline

lack of financial backing
failure to re-invent org

↳ keep abreast of issues &
adapting them

"organizational fatigue"

↳ delegation of tasks (lack of?)

"people get older"? → didn't regenerate w/ you
free extension of free-rider, but folks
put in enough to get what they needed
and then split.